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1962/10/22

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October 22, 1962

TO THE PRIME MINISTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friend:

First let me say how sorry I am that the proposed text of my statement has been so slow to get to you. We must use our own machine in such cases.

I am instructing our experts to confer at once with yours to provide the best possible legal case which will rest in the first instance on the Rio Treaty. But you are certainly right about the wider issues which arise in the nuclear age, and our people feel a strong case can be built on them.

It is this whole series of wider issues that has governed my initial decision. I fully recognize the hazards which you rightly point out, but I have had to take account also of the effect of inaction in the face of so obvious and deep a Soviet challenge. This is not simply or mainly a matter of American public opinion, and of the living under a missile threat, but has to be seen in the light of time. But this is to go deep in the convictions of the American national statement that it is essential that it would do very much to erode confidence in the United States, especially in the light of my repeated warnings. It would persuade the world that our determination is less than we are capable of, and that our commitments are not binding. It would invite further and still more dangerous moves.

I recognize the political nature of a decision of this kind, but in the older sense I believe that inaction would be more dangerous to our position in the world.

I am sure that you will understand the need for a strong statement, and that you will be able to build on it as you see fit.

I am sure that you will be able to build on it as you see fit.

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at variance with what all the Soviet experts have predicted that it is necessary to revise our whole estimate of his level of desperation or ambition, or both.

The particular points which you raise about European public opinion are understandable and have been much in our minds. We have some thoughts about meeting them about which we must be in touch. I also agree that we must keep in the closest touch about Berlin and that we can do this best when we have the first Soviet reaction.

Our naval commanders are instructed to use the very minimum of force, but I know of no sure escape from the problem of the first shot. Our best basic course is firmness, now. I look forward to our talk.

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FORWARDED COPY FOLLOWS

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FM THE WHITE HOUSE
TO SECSTATE WASHDC
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BT
//TOP SECRET// CITE CAP5495-62.
FOR S/S DUTY OFFICER SECRETARIAT, ATTN: MR. LITTLE. FROM
SITUATION ROOM. MR. BUNDY INSTRUCTED THAT THE FOLLOWING
MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT TO PRIME MINISTER OF GREAT
BRITAIN BE PASSED TO YOU AND ASKED THAT WE POINT OUT
THAT PARA. TWO IS FOR ACTION WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

TO THE PRIME MINISTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

DEAR FRIEND:

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FIRST LET ME SAY HOW SORRY I AM THAT THE PROPOSED
TEXT OF MY STATEMENT HAS BEEN SO SLOW TO GET TO YOU. WE

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MUST USE OUR OWN MACHINE IN SUCH CASES.

I AM INSTRUCTING OUR EXPERTS TO CONFER AT ONCE WITH YOURS TO PROVIDE THE BEST POSSIBLE LEGAL CASE, WHICH WILL REST IN THE FIRST INSTANCE ON THE RIO TREATY. BUT YOU ARE CERTAINLY RIGHT ABOUT THE WIDER ISSUES WHICH ARISE IN THE NUCLEAR AGE, AND OUR PEOPLE FEEL A STRONG CASE CAN BE BUILT ON THEM.

IT IS THIS WHOLE SERIES OF WIDER ISSUES THAT HAS GOVERNED MY INITIAL DECISION. I FULLY RECOGNIZE THE HAZARDS WHICH YOU RIGHTLY POINT OUT, BUT I HAVE HAD TO TAKE ACCOUNT ALSO OF THE EFFECT OF INACTION IN THE FACE OF SO OBVIOUS AND DEEP A SOVIET CHALLENGE. THIS IS NOT SIMPLY OR MAINLY A MATTER OF AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION, AND AS FOR LIVING UNDER A MISSILE THREAT, WE TOO HAVE BEEN DOING THAT FOR SOME TIME, BUT THIS IS SO DEEP A BREACH IN THE CONVENTIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL STALEMATE THAT IF UNCHALLENGED IT WOULD DEEPLY SHAKE CONFIDENCE IN THE UNITED STATES, ESPECIALLY IN THE LIGHT OF MY REPEATED WARNINGS. IT WOULD PERSUADE KHRUSHCHEV AND OTHERS THAT OUR DETERMINATION IS LOW, THAT WE ARE UNABLE TO MEET OUT COMMITMENTS, AND IT WOULD INVITE FURTHER AND STILL

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MORE DANGEROUS MOVES.

I RECOGNIZE THE PARTICULAR HAZARD OF A RIPOSTE IN BERLIN,
BUT IN THE WIDER SENSE I BELIEVE THAT INACTION WOULD BE STILL
MORE DANGEROUS TO OUR POSITION IN THAT OUTPOST.

I ASSURE YOU MOST SOLEMNLY THAT THIS IS NOT SIMPLY
A MATTER OF AROUSED PUBLIC OPINION OR OF PRIVATE
PASSION AGAINST CUBA. AS I AM SURE YOU KNOW, I HAVE
REGULARLY RESISTED PRESSURE FOR UNREASONABLE OR EXCESSIVE
ACTION, AND I AM NOT INTERESTED IN A SQUABBLE WITH CASTRO.
BUT THIS IS SOMETHING DIFFERENT: THE FIRST STEP IN A MAJOR
SHOWDOWN WITH KHRUSHCHEV, WHOSE ACTION IN THIS CASE IS SO
AT VARIANCE WITH WHAT ALL THE SOVIET EXPERTS HAVE PREDICTED
THAT IT IS NECESSARY TO REVISE OUR WHOLE ESTIMATE OF HIS
LEVEL OF DESPERATION OR AMBITION, OR BOTH.

THE PARTICULAR POINTS WHICH YOU RAISE ABOUT EUROPEAN
PUBLIC OPINION ARE UNDERSTANDABLE AND HAVE BEEN MUCH IN OUR
MINDS. WE HAVE SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT MEETING THEM ABOUT WHICH
WE MUST BE IN TOUCH. I ALSO AGREE THAT WE MUST KEEP IN THE
CLOSEST TOUCH ABOUT BERLIN AND THAT WE CAN DO THIS BEST
WHEN WE HAVE THE FIRST SOVIET REACTION.

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OUR NAVAL COMMANDERS ARE INSTRUCTED TO USE THE VERY
MINIMUM OF FORCE, BUT I KNOW OF NO SURE ESCAPE FROM THE
PROBLEM OF THE FIRST SHOT. OUR BEST BASIC COURSE IS FIRMNESS,
NOW. I LOOK FORWARD TO OUR TALK.

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